

LANCELOT REBORN: THE SQUIRE'S WARNING IN
THE CANTERBURY TALES

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At the beginning of Geoffrey Chaucer's romance, *The Squire's Tale*, the Tartar king Cambyuskan, perhaps more familiar to modern audiences as Genghis Khan, celebrates his birthday with a lavish feast, when suddenly a strange knight enters the hall. In order to communicate clearly to his audience the courtly manner in which this exotic knight greets those in attendance, the pilgrim Squire turns to Arthurian legend, noting that "Gawayn, with his olde curteisye, / Though he were comen ayeyn out of Fairye, / Ne koude hym nat amende with a word" (95-97). Thus having acquainted his audience with the manner in which the strange knight speaks, the pilgrim Squire continues his tale. The stranger knight has come on behalf of the King of Arabia and India, and bears four marvelous gifts: a steed of brass and a magic sword for Cambyuskan, and an enchanted ring and mirror for Cambyuskan's daughter Canacee. The stranger then alights and joins the festivities, which are so sumptuous that the pilgrim Squire is unable to describe them. No man could, he says, except "Launcelot, and he is deed" (287). Through these two Arthurian references, the pilgrim Squire indicates that he is well-versed in Arthurian lore, and he expects his audience to be as well. More importantly, the pilgrim Squire sends a carefully constructed message to his fellow pilgrim whose tale has just preceded his. That is, the Merchant in his tale of old January's cuckolding at the hands of his wife May and his squire Damian has offered a demeaning portrait of squires as lecherous traitors.¹ Regardless of whether or not the Merchant's disparaging remarks regarding squires are directed specifically at the pilgrim Squire, the latter warns the Merchant that he is the modern incarnation of Arthur's two greatest knights and will not tolerate such abuse of his vocation.

Yet such a threat is not well received by the Squire's fellows, for the pilgrim Franklin abruptly interrupts the Squire's story after nearly

seven hundred lines. Because of the extent to which Arthurian legend has pervaded the social consciousness of fourteenth-century English society, the Franklin recognizes the Squire's rash threat. Despite the class difference (the Franklin is a member of the bourgeoisie, whereas the Squire is a member of the aristocracy), the Franklin feels compelled to respond, cautiously reinterpreting the pilgrim Squire's concept of chivalrous behavior with his romance of Arveragus and Dorigen and offering an alternative manner of response, one that emphasizes patience over retaliation, to the Merchant's harmful comments. In this essay, I focus on the intertextuality between *The Merchant's Tale*, *The Squire's Tale*, and *The Franklin's Tale*, namely the emphases placed upon perception, loyalty, and treason, and examine the ways in which each narrator depicts squires and consequently defines (or redefines) chivalrous behavior.

L. Establishing the Pilgrim Squire as an Arthurian Authority: Gawain's Courtesy

In the first of the Squire's two Arthurian allusions, Gawain is linked in Chaucer's mind with courtesy: no other knight is as frequently associated with this particular trait, and numerous texts prove evidence for Gawain's courtesy. For example, in the British tradition, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the residents of Sir Bertilak de Hautdesert's castle whisper excitedly about the opportunity to learn courtesy from Gawain's example, and Bertilak's wife reminds Gawain that he is "so cortays and coynt of your hetes" (1525). Likewise, the French tradition also speaks to this trait; the thirteenth-century Prose *Lancelot* indicates that Gawain was "more courteous than any knight at the court. This courtesy inspired many ladies to love him, less for his chivalry than for his courtesy" ("fu cortois plus que chevaliers de laiens. Et par sa cortoisie l'amerent pluisors damoiseles qui ne l'amoient mie tant por sa chevalerie com por sa cortoisie"; 3.108; 69.3, 2.409).² Secondly, Chaucer's pilgrim Squire notes that Gawain was "comen ayeyn out of Fairye" (96). B. J. Whiting comments in his study of Gawain's character in the Middle Ages that "Gawain's original mistress was a fairy, queen of the other world, and nameless" (203),

and Dorothy Bethurum adds that the association of Arthur and his knights with the supernatural world was traditional, noting that "Gawain's participation in otherworld contests and jousts was the most conspicuous feature of his late medieval reputation" (33n96). Thus the Squire establishes himself as a knowledgeable consumer of the Arthurian legend; that is, he is familiar with its major players and their distinguishing characteristics.

Perhaps more importantly, though, the pilgrim Squire mentions Gawain in an attempt to define himself in a context that threatens to misidentify him. Following several tales that offer pejorative views of knights and squires (particularly *The Wife of Bath's Tale* and *The Merchant's Tale*), the pilgrim Squire attempts to negotiate his position in relation to the other pilgrims. After all, Harry Bailey requests a tale of love from the Squire, noting that "'certes ye / Konnen theron as muche as any man'" (2-3), and given the Squire's description in the General Prologue, we should not be surprised to find that Chaucer chooses to have the sole reference to King Arthur's most courteous knight fall from the Squire's lips. According to the General Prologue, the Squire is "A lovyere and a lusty bachelor" (80) and "Curteis he was, lowely, and servysable" (99). And just as the pilgrim Squire serves his father at the table, Gawain frequently fulfills this role; for example, in *Sir Perceval of Galles*, a text that Chaucer the pilgrim references in his Tale of Sir Thopas, Gawain appears as the king's "trenchepayne" (514). As J. R. Osgerby notes, "Gawain is the perfect example of the educated man, the 'complete' gentleman"—that is, he has compassion, eloquence, and integrity (105)—the very traits of a knight which the Squire seeks to cultivate in himself. Robert S. Haller continues this thought, suggesting that the Squire "wishes to be thought of as equaling Gawain in 'olde curteisye'" (289). Thus through his reference to Gawain, the pilgrim Squire attempts to distinguish himself from the derogatory examples offered by his fellow pilgrims.

II. Invoking Lancelot: The Squire's Objection to Damian

Nearly two hundred lines later occurs another Arthurian reference, that cited at the beginning of this essay. Following the presentation of

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the strange knight's marvelous gifts, the hall falls to revelry. Reluctant to describe these events, the Squire simply says,

Who koude telle yow the forme of daunces
So unkouthe, and swiche fresshe contenaunces,
Swich subtil lookyng and dissymulynge
For drede of jalouse mennes aperceyvynge?
No man but Launcelot, and he is deed. (283-87)

Scholars have been at odds to determine what exactly is going on here. Does this passage present Lancelot as an expert courtly dissimulator, or does it refer to his narrative abilities? The syntax suggests that it is the latter; the interrogative pronoun "Who" in the first line is replaced by Lancelot in the final line. No man but Lancelot is capable of describing the dances and coy glances exchanged among the revelers. As Vincent J. DiMarco notes, "there is no apparent basis (other than the idea that a perfect knight is also a perfect courtier) for the narrative skill the Squire here attributes to him" (893n287). After all, the youthful Lancelot frequently fails to hide his passion. As Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner notes, "Lancelot's love for Guenevere appears to be an open secret for a number of female characters" in Chrétien de Troyes's thirteenth-century *Chevalier de la Charrette* (142), and in the Prose *Lancelot*, Galehaut, Morgan le Fey, and even Arthur himself, following the episode of the False Guinevere, quickly perceive Lancelot's love for the queen. When we examine the various Arthurian references in the *dits* of Guillaume de Machaut, Jean Froissart, and Eustache Deschamps, from which Chaucer frequently drew, a tradition linking Lancelot with narrative skill and ability to dissemble remains conspicuously absent; in fact, in Machaut's fourteenth-century *Le Livre dou Voir Dit*, it was because of the strength and purity of their love that the affair was discovered: "[W]ith pure affection did they not so love / That their affair—and what a tragedy— / Was known and discovered thereby?" ("Qui tant samerent damour fine / Que leur amour dont ce fu perte / En fu sceue et descouverte"; 6411-13).

There are times when Lancelot is required (and able) to keep a straight face, particularly during his later years; for example, despite his

close affiliation with Lancelot throughout the Prose *Lancelot* and his swift perception of Perceval's love meditation in Chrétien's *Conte du Graal*, Gawain fails to learn of Lancelot's love for the queen until their carelessness in the Vulgate *La Mort le Roi Artus* reveals the affair to his brother: "[W]hereas [Lancelot] had previously indulged his sinful passion so prudently and so discreetly that no one knew of it, now he behaved so foolishly that it became apparent to Sir Gawain's brother Agravain" ("se il se estoit deuant tenu sagement & [si] couertement [que nus ne sen estoit aperceus] il sen garda ore maluaisement [& se maintient si folement] que agraains li freres monsignor Gauvain"; 4.91; 6.205).³ The *Queste del Saint Graal* likewise reveals his ability to play the virtuous knight. However, for the most part of the youthful knight's life, such dissimulations and "subtil lookyng" are unknown to a lover as true as Lancelot. In addition, Lancelot is not known to be schooled in the latest dance trends; the only time when Lancelot partakes in dancing is during his adventures in the Prose *Lancelot*, when he is caught up in a magic dance—but when the enchantment is broken, Lancelot continues on his adventures as if nothing has happened. Nor is Lancelot typically remembered for his eloquent outbursts; he is much more prone to fainting spells and silent trances, as is evidenced by Chrétien's *Chevalier de la Charrette* when Lancelot happens upon a comb containing a few strands of Guinevere's golden hair. Instead, Gawain seems a much more likely candidate for the Squire to reference at this moment in the tale.

Some scholars use these lines to argue a lack of knowledge regarding Arthurian legend on the part of the pilgrim Squire; for example, Karl Heinz Göller claims that "the Squire's reference to Lancelot, like his reference to Gawain at line 95, betrays a superficial knowledge of romance literature; whereas Lancelot was often associated with a destructive, almost demonic love, the Squire associates him with dancing and the like, that is, with the externalities of courtly life" (qtd. In Baker 186n287). Osgerby offers a similar, equally disparaging interpretation: "Launcelot's [name] was a byword for unfaithfulness. His kind of 'courtly love,' the Squire implies, is 'deed' because it is barren" (107). Yet as discussed above, the Squire's knowledge of Gawain is not superficial in that he knows of Gawain's

association with courtesy and his removal to the land of "Fairye." Second, I disagree with Osgerby's assessment of Lancelot's love, for it is in no way presented as barren, much less demonic, in the Prose *Lancelot* or in Chrétien's *Chevalier de la Charrette*; in fact, I would argue that Lancelot is presented as a Christ figure in Chrétien's *Charrette*, particularly in the manner in which his coming is foretold and his freeing of the people trapped in the land of Gorre. In addition, in the Prose *Lancelot*, because of his love for Guinevere, Lancelot saves Arthur's kingdom no fewer than three times,⁴ and in the Post-Vulgate *Mort Artu*, it is Lancelot who avenges Arthur's death by killing Mordred's sons.

In terms of his spiritual state, Lancelot's love for Guinevere propels him to seek out adventure in order to succor the weak and defenseless, whereas other knights merely seek glory; in fact, in the Prose *Lancelot*, as Lancelot begins to attain fame, he comes "to the decision that he would go about in secret, so that he should not be recognized as a man bent on winning fame and honor" ("s'en vait entre lui et ses escuiers et s'apense qu'il veut aler cheleement en teil maniere que nus nel connoisse com chil qui bee a los et a honor conquerre"; 2.73; 23a.28, 7.305).⁵ Although Lancelot's love for Guinevere places him in mortal sin for much of the *Queste del Saint Graal*, in the Post-Vulgate *Mort Artu*, it is that very love for Guinevere that leads Lancelot to a hermitage to serve out the remainder of his days in religious contemplation and good deeds.⁶ Furthermore, several other knights, as they have throughout his lifetime, choose to follow Lancelot's example and join him in the hermitage; clearly Lancelot's love yields spiritual, albeit unconventional, fruit. Ultimately, Lancelot's love is spiritual and constructive, not destructive as Göller claims, nor barren as Osgerby suggests, in that he leads others to Christian salvation.⁷

Indeed, it initially seems that the Squire would have been more successful with his Arthurian name-dropping if he had mentioned Gawain when describing the dancing—not Lancelot. After all, as shown throughout the Prose *Lancelot* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gawain is nimble with his tongue, and he often reads a situation quite clearly. Gawain would likely be an excellent narrator, and Coolidge Otis Chapman has already pointed out the parallels in

structure between *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *The Squire's Tale* (521-24). We might, then, expect the pilgrim Squire to invoke Gawain again when it comes time to describe the dancing and intrigues of the court. However, he surprises us by linking Lancelot with the exotic forms and concealments.

I would like to propose an alternative reading to those suggested by Göller and Osgerby—namely, that because the Squire has a thorough knowledge of romance literature (as is evidenced by his earlier use of Gawain's name), he deliberately chooses Lancelot, relying upon his audience to associate Lancelot with fidelity. Let us turn, for the moment, to the preceding tale, that of the Merchant, where we meet the notorious squire Damian. When we place this tale alongside that of the pilgrim Squire, a number of parallels emerge. Both describe feasting that is beyond a mere mortal's power of description. Naturally dancing and drinking take place at such an event, and a particular character appears at this point in each narrative. For the Merchant, it is Damian, who "carf biforn the knyght ful many a day" (1773). We have heard an echo of this phrase in the General Prologue, where we are told by Chaucer that the Squire himself "carf biforn his fader at the table" (100). In addition, Damian is a squire, and is associated, through his lust, with a character named May—remember that the pilgrim Squire is "as fressh as is the month of May" (92), and the Merchant describes his female character repeatedly as "fresshe May" (1782).⁸ Whether or not the Merchant directs his tale toward the pilgrim Squire, placing him in a derogatory category with all squires, we cannot know. Nonetheless, the initial disparaging similarities between the pilgrim Squire and Damian would, I argue, be immediately apparent to the pilgrim Squire.

As a result, the pilgrim Squire receives the Merchant's Tale as a personal insult and seeks through a number of verbal echoes to respond to the Merchant's treatment of squires and courtly love. As Paul F. Baum suggests, the pilgrim Squire disapproved of "the inelegant tone and temper of the bourgeois Merchant" (376). Neville offers a similar interpretation of the pilgrim Squire's lines regarding the "subtil looking and dissimulynges" of the dancers at the king's feast: "In these days of dullness and suspicion, [the Squire] says, only one who has known the

full meaning of the service of love can describe the true sociability of a feast. Only Lancelot, exemplar of courtesy, could describe the decorous coquetry of life without bursting into a denunciation of love" (178). While I agree with Neville's opinion that the pilgrim Squire's tale offers a contrast specifically to *The Merchant's Tale*, I disagree with her claim that "the Squire, courteous and modest as he is, [does not intend] anything like overt rebuke to either" (177).⁹ I propose that the pilgrim Squire takes offense at these comments, and through his use of the reference to Lancelot, attempts to establish his superiority over the Merchant while subtly warning him. When the Squire talks about the dancing and subtle looks, he is aware that these are not traits typically associated with Lancelot; instead, he evokes Lancelot as a true lover while connecting the situation to that described by the Merchant.

When Damian is struck with longing for May in *The Merchant's Tale*, it is because of Venus, as she "bar it [hire brond] daunsynge in hire hond; / And to his bed he wente hym hastily" (4.1778-79). Damian's subsequent bed rest is typical of the courtly lover in many romances, but the Merchant's interpretation of Damian's malady is not. Immediately the Merchant launches into an attack on Damian:

O famulier foo, that his servyce bedeth!
O servant traytour, false hoomly hewe,
Lyk to the naddre in bosom sly untrew
.....
Thyn owene squier and thy borne man,
Entendeth for to do thee vileynye. (1784-86, 1790-91)

Whereas the courtly lover in romance is helpless against the onslaught of love, in the eyes of the Merchant, Damian becomes actively treacherous, plotting against his lord January.

There are a number of similarities with the central love triangle of Arthur-Guinevere-Lancelot within *The Merchant's Tale*, but as my immediate focus is on the pilgrim Squire's reception of the Merchant's tale, I will not develop those parallels here. However, I would point out that while Damian's loyalty lies first with January, as he is in the latter's service before the appearance of May, Lancelot is first and

foremost Guinevere's knight; in fact, during the episode with the False Guinevere in the Prose *Lancelot*, he breaks with Arthur in order to champion Guinevere. Thus Lancelot, and by extension the pilgrim Squire, remains an emblem of loyalty, whereas Damian is false in his service.

In retaliation for the Merchant's diatribe against squires, the pilgrim Squire offers his interpretation of the events at Cambyuskan's hall in *The Squire's Tale*, modifying the events slightly. Once more Venus is present: "Now dauncen lusty Venus children deere" (272); however, whereas the Merchant interprets Damian's behavior in terms of treason, the Squire gently chides his audience, reminding them, "He moste han knowen love and his servyse / And been a feestlych man as fressh as May / That sholde yow devysen swich array" (280-82). In other words, the Merchant, being neither a true lover nor a convivial man, cannot truly describe the events of the wedding, much less Damian's behavior; his words are suspect.

Furthermore, the Squire emphasizes perception and jealousy just prior to his reference to Lancelot: "Swich subtil *lookyng* and dissymulynge / For drede of jalouse mennes *aperceyvynge*" (285-86; emphasis mine). However, Lancelot does not fear Arthur's jealousy; he is motivated solely by his desire to please Guinevere. In fact, in the Vulgate *Mort le Roi Artus*, once Lancelot has rescued the Queen from the stake and learned he cannot be reconciled to Arthur, "Lancelot was very distressed, not because he feared Arthur, but rather because he loved him greatly" ("Si en fu lancelot trop durement corecies ne mie por ce quil le doutoit . Mais por ce quil lamoit de grant amor"; 4.128; 6.298). The pilgrim Squire is aware of Lancelot's attitude toward Arthur but he has another point to make regarding his fellow pilgrim, the Merchant. He has listened closely to the Merchant's condemnation of Damian—and his subsequent description of January. For it is "Amydde his lust and his prosperitee" that January is "woxen blynd, and that al sodeynly" (2070-71). Closely associated with January's physical blindness is his jealousy; the Merchant uses forms of this word four times in his entire tale, the first occurrence immediately following the onset of January's blindness: "And therwithal the fyr of jalousie, / . . . / So brente his herte" (2073-75).

We now have a sharp divide between the types of true lovers with whom the Squire wishes to be associated, as exemplified by Lancelot, and those treacherous lovers typified by the Merchant. Both Damian and January actively pursue May to fulfill their desires. In fact, the Merchant uses the same phrases to describe the effect of May's beauty on both January and Damian; for example, each is "ravysshed" by the sight of her (1750, 1774),¹⁰ and each burns with desire: Damian "in Venus fyr / So brenneth" (1875-76), and January fears May's infidelity to such an extent that "so brente his herte" (2075). But their desires are the results of lust, not love; remember that January's blindness strikes "amydde his lust" (2070), and May seeks a time when she might "unto [Damian's] lust suffice" (1999).

The pilgrim Squire, on the other hand, seeks to serve, rather than be served by the beloved. Although the Squire is described by Chaucer the narrator as a "lusty bachelor" (80), his actions set him apart from the men of the Merchant's tale in that the latter two seek their own pleasures through May's body, rather than seeking to serve her as a true lover, in the eyes of the pilgrim Squire, should. January and Damian act in sharp contrast to both the pilgrim Squire, who is described in the General Prologue as one who hopes "to stonden in his lady grace" (88), and to Lancelot, who would rather die than reveal his love to Guinevere in the Prose *Lancelot*. That is, both the pilgrim Squire and Lancelot feel themselves to be adequately rewarded merely by the benevolent regard of their beloved, whether it be a kind word from her or the opportunity to gaze on her loveliness.

In addition, the pilgrim Squire's tale of Canacee continues to recall and respond to the Merchant's tale; for example, the words uttered by the female falcon to Canacee are the same as those spoken by the Merchant while delivering his tale: "pitee renneth soone in gentil herte" (479).¹¹ Further parallels emerge as the falcon describes her false suitor, a tercelet "That semed welle of alle gentillesse; / Al were he ful of treson and falsnesse" (505-06). January describes Damian to May as a "'gentil squier'" (1907), but the omniscient narrator laments that he is a "servant traytour" (1786). Furthermore, Damian is "[l]yk to the naddre in bosom sly untrew" (1786); the falcon also describes her tercelet as a snake: "'Right as a serpent hit hym under floures / Til he

may seen his tyme for to byte . . .” (512-13). Both Damian and the tercelet appear to be worthy suitors, but quickly fail in their service to their beloveds in that once the lady yields her love to the male, she becomes the servant. The male appears to be on the verge of death, and the female succumbs to pity; as the falcon notes, “[M]y wyl obeyed his wyl / In alle thyng” (569-70). The tercelet quickly tires of his “newefangelnesse” and finds himself ravished once more by another bird (610).

In contrast to the tercelet and squires such as Damian, nearly all of the references to Lancelot in the *dits* of Machaut and Froissart describe Lancelot in terms of his loyalty to Guinevere and of the great deeds and sufferings that he undertook for her sake—two things that are absent from the Merchant’s description of Damian.¹² For example, in his *Livre dou Voir Dit*, Machaut writes, “Did not Lancelot pass over / The sword bridge for his true love / Guenevere, who was the queen” (“Ne passa le pont de lespee / Lancelos pour la bien amee / Guenevre • qui estoit royne”; 6408-10), and Froissart writes in his *L’Espinette amoureuse* that Lancelot (among others) has “given up / [His] health in great martyrdom” through his pursuit of honorable deeds in Guinevere’s name (“Nennil ains en ont bien livre / A grant martire leur sante”; 2316-17). The pilgrim Squire himself has also performed military deeds in order to win regard from his beloved; as the General Prologue indicates, he has “been somtyme in chyvachie / . . . / And born hym weel” (85-87). Thus by explicitly mentioning Lancelot at this point in his narrative, the pilgrim Squire rejects the Merchant’s depiction of squires and courtly lovers; the Merchant is, after all, a “dul man” incapable of understanding the subtleties of true love and his character Damian is nowhere near the caliber of the pilgrim Squire (279).

III. Lancelot’s “Death”

There is yet another aspect of the Squire’s Arthurian reference to be explored, however. When Damian slips his love letter to May, he tells her to keep it secret, “For I am deed if that this thyng be kyd” (1943). The Squire echoes this sentiment in the line “No man but Launcelot, and he is deed” (287). Of course, this comment may be

taken literally, suggesting that the time is distant when knights such as Lancelot lived. Indeed, Stanley J. Kahrl suggests that through his references to Gawain and Lancelot, the pilgrim Squire establishes himself as a “representative of a class whose time has gone; he is in training for a place in a world that no longer exists” (qtd. in Baker 44). Gawain is in the land of Fairy and Lancelot is dead—but are they truly?

The pilgrim Squire, by his own account, is more familiar with French than his native language of English (“Myn Englissh eek is insufficient” [37]) to tell fully the wonders of Cambyuskan’s court. While I agree with Kahrl that this is an example of the Squire’s use of the “modesty topos” (200n21;201), I would point out that since the pilgrim Squire also has a reputation as a courtly lover (as evidenced both by the General Prologue and the Host’s words prior to his tale), it seems highly unlikely that he would not be familiar with the major French romances of Lancelot—especially the thirteenth-century Prose *Lancelot*.

This cycle of romances spans most of Lancelot’s life, and no fewer than fifteen times false news of Lancelot’s death wracks havoc on the emotions of Arthur’s court. In fact, Lancelot himself announces his “death” to one of his opponents: “But everyone knows everywhere that Lancelot has been dead for over a year” (“Mais l’en set par tot, plus a d’un an, que cil Lancelos est mors”; 3.34; 43.12, 2.113). In addition, nearly every time that Lancelot’s death is announced, it is accompanied with a description of the feats that he might have completed, had he lived. For example, Banin, upon learning of Lancelot’s supposed death, laments (to Lancelot, ironically) that the people of Gaul wait for Lancelot to free them, for he is the only one capable of such deeds: “The people of his country want to see him more than all other men, for they are still waiting to be freed by his prowess from the tyranny of Claudas. But it seems to me that they won’t be, because he’s dead” (“cil de son país le desirent a veoir sor tos homes, kar encore atendent il a estre delivré de la main Claudas par sa proesce. Mais il m’est avis qu’il nel seront mes, puis qu’il est mors”; 3.66; 50.28, 2.239). On another adventure, Lancelot, traveling incognito, rescues a maiden and hears once again of his demise when the maiden tells him, “I left yesterday morning sad and distressed over

the death of the good knight [Lancelot]—a death that's a loss to us all, for never again will there be a knight to pity poor maidens like he did" ("il me dist que c'estoit por Lancelot de Lac qui morz estoit. . . . me parti ier matin dolente et couroucie de la mort au bon chevalier dont touz li mons avra soufraite, car jamais ne sera hom qui ait tel pitié de povre damoisele com il avoit"; 3.144; 75.2, 4.127). Another major narrative of Lancelot's deeds, Chrétien's *Chevalier de la Charrette*, also offers an episode in which Lancelot is believed to be dead; in fact, the queen is so distressed by the news that she "almost killed herself / When she heard the lying rumor / Of Lancelot's death" ("A po qu'ele ne s'est ocise / maintenant que de Lancelot / la mançonge et la novele ot"; 4160-62). Therefore, when the Squire remarks that there is "No man but Launcelot, and he is deed," he follows an established formula by indicating the need for a great deed to be undertaken, followed by the clarification that Lancelot is the only person capable of completing such a task—Lancelot, however, being dead. The pilgrim Squire merely continues this tradition of false rumors of Lancelot's death; an audience well-versed in Arthurian literature would recognize the formula as described above and consequently know that Lancelot is never truly dead as long as others strive to emulate his example.

Gawain also is not truly dead; instead, he is in "Fairye," lingering in the arms of his fairy mistress, and could return at any moment. Joyce E. Peterson is half correct when she states that "Lancelot is 'deed,' but Gawain lives" (69), for the pilgrim Squire, in his tale and in his life, is determined to keep the memory and the deeds of these two great knights alive well into the fourteenth century. Thus through his references to both Gawain and Lancelot, the pilgrim Squire situates himself as the living embodiment of Arthurian legend, a position that he views as superior to the world view of the Merchant, driven blind, like his January, by jealousy and lust. It is fortunate for the Merchant that he is not a knight; otherwise, he might have to account for his slurs against squires on the battlefield, just as Lancelot frequently is forced to clear his name (and that of Guinevere). For example, during the tourney between the lady of Pomelegoi and the lady of Noauz in Chrétien's *Charrette*, the incognito Lancelot is instructed by Guinevere "to do 'his worst'" ("que 'au noauz' que je li mant"; 5645); despite

the volumes of ridicule and abuse that he receives, Lancelot obeys. Yet once Lancelot is given leave to do his best, those who "had spent most of the night and day / Ridiculing [Lancelot], / Were to be astounded" ("Tuit seront esbaï par tans / li deceü, li amusé, / qui an lui gaber ont usé / piece del jor et le la nuit"; 5924-27) as Lancelot avenges himself on those who had formerly mocked him: "Lancelot taught [the son of the King of Ireland] a lesson / In this joust" ("Lanceloz une de ses teches / li a aprise a cele joste"; 5940-41).¹³ Perhaps, the pilgrim Squire implies, he will find an opportunity along the journey to deal a similar blow in exchange for the Merchant's disparaging words.

As John M. Fyler notes, one of the "most distinctive concerns of the romance narrative [deals with] questions of identity, complicated by disguise or ignorance, distinctions between self and other; the difficulties of making discriminations in a mysterious, magical world" (2). Chaucer therefore appropriately assigns the genre of romance to his youngest pilgrim; not only must the Squire seek to stand apart from his father's long shadow, but he must also deal with the narrow definitions imposed upon him by his fellow pilgrims. Whereas there are squires such as Damian in the world, the pilgrim Squire accompanying the Merchant on this journey has nothing in common with the Merchant's creation; furthermore, since neither Gawain nor Lancelot are truly dead, they still present a threat to such figures as the Merchant, who, because of his shortcomings, will never understand the true nature of love, and will perpetually be forced to question the fidelity of his wife.

IV. The Pilgrim Squire's Reception: The Franklin as Mediator

Yet the Squire, after issuing his warning to the Merchant and gaining confidence in his story-telling, is quickly cut off by the Franklin. The Host, rather than rebuking the Franklin for his interruption and allowing the Squire to continue (as he does for the Wife of Bath when she is interrupted by the Friar), exclaims, "'Straw for youre gentillesse!'" and reminds the Franklin of his obligation to tell a story (695). There has been much debate already as to whether or not The Squire's Tale is indeed complete as a fragment, or if Chaucer meant to return to it at some later time. For example, the premature

termination of The Cook's Tale provides Chaucer with a narrative means of ending the fabliaux contest, and the Host's interruption of The Tale of Sir Thopas suggests the fragment as it exists is complete. John W. Clark, for example, thinks Chaucer meant to go back and finish the tale (160-61), while Peterson argues that The Squire's Tale is in its final, intended form as a fragment, and that when the Franklin interrupts him, he does so "*pretending* to think him finished" (66). Of course, until some document emerges to confirm Chaucer's intent one way or the other, we can never know with any certainty whether The Squire's Tale is complete, which makes assessing the pilgrims' response to the Squire's tale of Canacee difficult.

Nonetheless, as D. A. Pearsall notes, the Squire has revealed his contempt for the lower classes, which constitute the majority of the pilgrims, including the Host (87),¹⁴ and the outline that the Squire provides just before the Franklin's timely intervention reveals the enormous scope of his tale—the pilgrims could easily arrive at and return from Canterbury before he reaches the intended ending.¹⁵ However, whereas the Host has nominal control over the story-telling contest, because of class differences, he is unable tactfully to interrupt the young pilgrim Squire. Therefore, the Franklin, perhaps sensing the growing irritation among the pilgrims, steps in, artfully praising the Squire to avoid offending or causing further embarrassment on the latter's part, and the Host's following remark ("Straw for youre gentillesse!") is indirectly aimed at the Squire.¹⁶ In the following section, I argue that the Franklin's words to the pilgrim Squire and his subsequent tale are meant as a response to the young pilgrim, particularly after the latter's warning to the Merchant.¹⁷ In other words, the Franklin attempts to defuse the potentially volatile situation between the pilgrim Squire and the Merchant by encouraging the former to hold his tongue (and possibly his sword) and to ignore the Merchant's disparaging words.

As a member of the emerging bourgeoisie, the landowning Franklin clearly has aspirations to the aristocracy, as indicated by his praise of the pilgrim Squire; he dearly wishes that his own son "were a man of swich discrecioun / As that ye been!" (685-86). Of course, the Franklin has not set much of an example for his son to follow, for the

General Prologue initially describes the Franklin as "Epicurus owene sone, / That heeld opinioun that pleyn delit / Was verray felicitye parfit" (336-38). He delights in the pleasures of the secular world, and his table is never depleted; it is no surprise, then, that the Franklin reveals to the pilgrim Squire that his son prefers "to pleye at dees, and to despende / And lese al that he hath . . ." (690-91). Yet at the conclusion of the portrait in the General Prologue, Chaucer the narrator includes an important detail about the Franklin's occupation: "At sessionours ther was he lord and sire; / Ful ofte tyme he was knyght of the shire" (355-56), and "A shirreve hadde he been, and a contour" (359). Although a *contour* is typically considered to be an "official who oversees the collecting and auditing of taxes for a shire," the *Middle English Dictionary* indicates that it can also refer to "a pleader in court, a lawyer." That is, in his roles as a member of Parliament and as a sheriff, he is used to mediating and settling disputes.¹⁸ Therefore, we can infer that the Franklin is well versed in dispute mediation, as revealed by his comments in the early sections of his tale.

The Franklin's tale focuses on issues of "trouthe," sovereignty, and "gentillesse." The story opens with the lover Arveragus, who is obedient in all things and is consequently rewarded with the lady Dorigen's love and hand in marriage. Yet after a year of marriage, Arveragus departs Brittany to pursue the tournament circuit in England, leaving Dorigen to mourn his departure. Meanwhile, the young squire Aurelius falls in love with Dorigen, and when he seeks her love, she playfully tells him that he may have her love once he has removed the dangerous rocks from the coast of Brittany. With the help of a clerk from Orleans, Aurelius is able to create the illusion that the rocks have been removed. When Dorigen learns of this seemingly impossible feat, she despairs, but is ordered by her husband to fulfill her promise. Aurelius, however, is moved by the knight's noble example, and releases Dorigen from her rash promise.

Yet before the pilgrim Franklin gives any defining characteristics of his major players (in fact, we do not even learn the characters' names until line 808, more than 70 lines into the tale), he launches into a tangent on the need to overlook the occasional verbal slight, advising his audience:

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For every word men may nat chide or pleyne.
Lerneth to suffer. . . .

.....
For in this world, certain, ther no wight is
That he ne dooth or seith somtyme amys. (776-80)

At first glance, these lines seem out of place. That is, the Franklin has just been talking about marriage, and how neither women nor men like to be enslaved to another. There seems to be no clear connection to his story at this point in the telling. Of course, once the tale reaches its conclusion, these words make more sense in that Dorigen speaks unwisely when she tells Aurelius to remove all the rocks. However, the Franklin's immediate audience—that is, his fellow pilgrims—would not know what was coming until the end. But when we consider the larger context of the situation—that is, the Merchant has offended the pilgrim Squire with his tale, and the naïve young man has responded with the threat of retaliation—the Franklin's tangent appears to be intended for the hotheaded Squire. In other words, the Franklin, drawing upon his experience as a member of Parliament and as a sheriff, reminds the pilgrim Squire that patience is a virtue. Before resuming his narrative of Arveragus and Dorigen, the Franklin delivers the final word on the matter: "On every wrong a man may nat be wreken" (784). At no point in his tale does the concept of vengeance appear; therefore, I argue that the Franklin speaks directly to the pilgrim Squire at this point in his tale, cautioning the younger pilgrim against any rash action. Yet just in case his message does not sink in, the Franklin follows the pilgrim Squire's example and turns to Arthurian legend to further forestall the possibility of revenge.

V. The Franklin's Interruption and Tale: Invoking Gawain

A number of scholars see the Franklin as expressing approval of the pilgrim Squire and his tale; for example, Clark does not see any reason "for being sure that the Franklin might not have liked the Squire's Tale" (160), and points out the Franklin's admiration of the

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Squire's "gentillesse" (161). Neville also writes that the Franklin "intends primarily to compliment the pilgrim Squire" (179). Certainly, the Franklin's comments about his own son confirm these judgments:

"I have a sone, and by the Trinitee,
I hadde levere than twenty pound worth lond,
.....
He were a man of swich discrecioun
As that ye been!" (682-86)

Yet Haller suggests a more subtle motive for the Franklin's high praise, noting that the Franklin's goal is to "thank the Squire for providing him with the means of imputing himself noble" (294). However, while I agree with Haller's suggestion that the Franklin has ulterior motives, I disagree that the Franklin seeks self-advancement. I would argue that the Franklin is instructing the Squire, cautioning him against revenge against the Merchant. He is delivering his message much as one would deliver medicine to a recalcitrant child—that is, with a spoonful of sugar. He flatters the pilgrim Squire in order to encourage the latter to listen to his message of patience, thereby confirming the pilgrim Squire's self-identification with Gawain.

Remember the ways in which Gawain is introduced in the pilgrim Squire's tale; the stranger knight resembles Gawain through his "heigh reverence and obeisaunce, / As wel in speche as in contenaunce" (93-94). According to the *Middle English Dictionary*, "reverence" entails "respect or courtesy toward someone" while "obeisaunce" suggests "respectful submission, homage; deference, reverence; courtesy." These descriptions only serve to highlight the emphasis on courtesy that surrounds Gawain. The Franklin is careful to construct his praise of the pilgrim Squire in similar terms. For example, he tells the latter that "'thow hast thee wel yquit / And gentilly'" (673-74); in other words, the Squire's behavior is exemplary, equal to that of Gawain. Furthermore, the Franklin informs him that his use of language is similarly peerless: "'So feelyngly thou spekest, sire, . . . / . . . ther is noon that is heere / Of eloquence that shal be thy peere'" (676-78).

When the Franklin begins his tale, which continues the pilgrim Squire's thread of the courtly lover, he continues this praise and identification with Gawain by tactfully describing the squire Aurelius as a positive parallel to the pilgrim Squire.¹⁹ Even though he is a member of the bourgeoisie, he is nonetheless an authority on Arthurian romance, for as the General Prologue indicates, he is "a worthy vavasour" (360). This French term denotes a figure often found in the pages of Chrétien's romances, as Dolores Warwick Frese notes, and Chaucer retains many of the defining traits in his portrait of the Franklin, including his penchant for hospitality.²⁰ But perhaps most important in the works of Chrétien and Chaucer is the vavasour's obligation "to assist a young chevalier in his quest for honour by feats of arms undertaken" (Frese 189). Thus, as an embodiment of Arthurian legend himself, the Franklin is the ideal figure to direct the young pilgrim Squire along the proper path, and he does so by placing a number of verbal echoes throughout his own tale, gently chiding while redirecting the pilgrim Squire's hostility.

The Franklin constructs the portrait of his squire very carefully and deliberately in order to evoke the squires of the previous tales as well as the pilgrim Squire himself. For example, as noted earlier, the pilgrim Squire is, according to the General Prologue, "as fressh as is the month of May" (92); therefore, the main events of the Franklin's Tale also take place "on the sixte morwe of May" (906). Furthermore, Aurelius "fressher was . . . / . . . than is the month of May" (927-28). Because the pilgrim Squire is a "lovyere and a lusty bachelor" (80), so too is Aurelius: a "lusty squier, servant to Venus" (937). Each squire also possesses similar talents. The pilgrim Squire spends his time riding, singing, dancing, jousting, and writing songs and poetry (94-96); therefore, it is no surprise that Aurelius performs these same accomplishments: "He syngeth, daunceth" (929), and composes "manye layes, / Songes, compleintes, roundels, virelayes" (947-48).

Perhaps most importantly, though, both squires are virtuous, at least as implied by the Franklin when he says of Aurelius that he is "Yong, strong, right vertuous, and riche, and wys" (933). He deliberately establishes his squire as "Oon of the beste farynge man on lyve" (932). Although Aurelius bears a superficial resemblance to the

Merchant's offending squire Damian in that he insists he will die without Dorigen's mercy ("Have mercy, sweete, or ye wol do me deye!" [978]), Aurelius performs the deed required to win her love whereas Damian does nothing.²¹

VI. The Franklin's Invitation

Yet not only does the Franklin offer a flattering portrait of squires; he also presents Arveragus as a model of perfection toward which the pilgrim Squire should strive. For not only is Arveragus, like the pilgrim Squire and Aurelius, "lusty" (1091) and "fresshe" (1092); he is also "of chivalrie the flour" (1088). Throughout the Arthurian corpus, there are three knights who typically receive the epithet "the flower of chivalry": Gawain, Hector (the brother of Lancelot), and most frequently, Lancelot. Through the pilgrim Squire's Arthurian references, the Franklin picks up on the younger pilgrim's desire to reach the heights of chivalry held by Gawain and Lancelot, and now offers his advice on how the pilgrim Squire may best achieve his goals without explicitly displacing the aristocratic youth as the prevailing Arthurian authority. After all, it is in his character to instruct younger men such as the pilgrim Squire, as the Franklin tells us himself that he often has "my sone snybbed" (688). Through Arveragus, therefore, the Franklin instructs the Squire that "'Trouthe is the hyeste thyng that man may kepe'" (1479), and that one must, like Arveragus, suffer perceived slights: "'As I may best, I wol my wo endure'" (1484). If the Squire decides to identify with Arveragus, and by extension, Lancelot and Gawain, he must have patience with the Merchant.

But as Neville notes, a medieval audience would have seen Aurelius's sacrifice as greater because "As a knight, Arveragus had a higher obligation than Aurelius to honor a promise" (179). In case the Franklin has misread the pilgrim Squire's aspirations, he offers Aurelius as an equally compelling model for emulation when Aurelius decides that "fro his lust yet were hym levere abyde / Than doon so heigh a cherlyssh wrecchednesse / Agayns franchise and alle gentillesse" (1522-24). The pilgrim Squire, through his tale, has shown his concern with "gentillesse," so the Franklin hits the mark when he

has his squire tell Dorigen, after relieving her of her sexual obligation, that "Thus kan a squier doon a gentil dede / As wel as kan a knyght" (1543-44). Regardless of whether the pilgrim Squire chooses to align himself with the squire or the knight of *The Franklin's Tale*, he comes out on top, unlike the male lovers of *The Merchant's Tale*.

VII. Aristocratic Arthurian Authority

Although the pilgrim Squire's use of Arthurian legend may be viewed as an attempt to familiarize an audience composed largely of the lower estate with the exotic setting of *The Squire's Tale*, the overall tone of his tale suggests instead that he looks down upon his fellow pilgrims with disdain; they are part of the "lewed peple" and therefore should marvel at his narrative ability (221).²² I would argue that the aristocratic estate also abuses Arthurian legend in that the pilgrim Squire sees it as establishing his superiority over others and as authorizing him to vengeance. The Squire seeks to imitate art in life; but as the Franklin points out, he too has a superficial understanding as to the true nature of knights such as Lancelot or Gawain, who understand, as does Arveragus, that "On every wrong a man may nat be wroken" (784).

Although the Franklin offers high praise for the pilgrim Squire, both directly in his interruption and indirectly in his description of Aurelius, when we consider the pilgrim Squire's portrait placement in the larger context of the General Prologue, we see, as Peterson notes, that "the narrator imposes on him a judgment which is tacitly negative" (67). That is, the pilgrim Squire's description, when taken in isolation, is fairly impartial; he is a typical youth who enjoys outdoor sports and the pursuit of love. However, his portrait immediately follows that of the Knight, whom Peterson identifies as the "genuine article of knightliness . . . who reflects in his person and in his tale a proper perspective on courtliness; the Squire, by contrast, tells a trivial tale because he is a trivial person" (67). Although both members of the aristocracy have engaged in military pursuits, the quality of the pilgrim Squire's is somewhat suspect. While Chaucer the narrator devotes twenty-one lines to the Knight's endeavors, only two lines are given to

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the pilgrim Squire's efforts. More importantly, the Knight fights for "cristendom" (49), a cause much larger than himself; on the other hand, the Squire fights in "hope to stonden in his lady grace" (88). His concern is immediate and selfish. Furthermore, their appearances contrast; the Knight's tunic is "Al bismotered with his habergeon" (76) while the Squire sports a tunic "Embrouded . . . / Al ful of fresshe floures" (89-90). Once more, the pilgrim Squire's concern with appearances is evident.

Ultimately, while the Knight embodies the traits that set Lancelot and Gawain apart in all of his actions, the pilgrim Squire offers only a pale imitation of such virtue. Although he claims to be the reincarnation of Lancelot, he falls far short of his idol, as the Franklin realizes. But perhaps he will prove akin to another Arthurian knight, Perceval, who deigns to learn from the various mentors whom he meets along his journey. The Franklin might be just such a mentor, and the fact that his tale, unlike that of the pilgrim Squire, is allowed to be completed suggests a potentially receptive audience. Or perhaps the pilgrim Squire will learn, as does Lancelot later in his life, to turn his attention to higher matters, such as God, forsaking the mortal vanities of secular life.

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Notes

Versions of this paper were presented at the 31st annual meeting of the Mid-America Medieval Association, Kansas City, MO, February 2007, and at the 22nd International Arthurian Congress, Rennes, France, July 2008.

¹ Chaucer himself was a squire to Lionel of Ulster, son of Edward III; however, my exploration focuses on Chaucer's presentation of an aristocrat's rendering of the Arthurian legend, rather than attempting to make any biographical connections.

² All quotations of the French Prose *Lancelot* are from Micha, cited parenthetically by the division and section of the *Lancelot*, and then, following the comma, the volume and page number. The translations are from Lacy, cited parenthetically by volume and page number. This section was translated by Roberta L. Krueger.

³ Quotations of the French Vulgate *La Mort le Roi Artus* are from Sommer, cited parenthetically by volume and page number. This section was translated by Norris J. Lacy. In fact, Gawain later comments to the maiden of Escalot that Lancelot "is so secretive around everyone at court that no one knows he is in love" ("il sest si tos iors celes vers toutes gens que len ne pot savoir que il ama par amors"; 4.98; 6.218).

⁴ Elspeth Kennedy also comments on this aspect of Lancelot's career in "The Figure of Lancelot in the *Lancelot-Graal*," in *Lancelot and Guinevere: A Casebook*, ed. Lori J. Walters (New York: Routledge, 2002) 85.

⁵ This section is translated by Carleton W. Carroll.

⁶ Considering the pilgrim Squire's self-alignment with both Lancelot and Gawain, neither of whom fare well in the *Queste del Saint Graal*, I would argue that the Squire is either unfamiliar with this particular text, or ignores it as inappropriate to his youthful worldview, which emphasizes martial and amatory prowess over spiritual accomplishments.

⁷ Joan Tasker Grimbert notes that the love of Tristan and Iseult is a "fated / fatal love," one that is beyond their control, as opposed to the

"amour chevaleresque" of lovers such as Lancelot and Guinevere, which "inspires prowess that benefits the entire community" (xxxvii).

⁸ Additional references to "fresshe May" can be found in lines 1822, 1859, 1871, 1882, 1886, 1896, 1932, etc., of the Merchant's Tale. Joyce E. Peterson also notes these parallel motifs.

⁹ Peterson also echoes this idea: "The strategy [the pilgrim Squire] chooses appear [*sic*] to be an attempt to correct the Merchant's picture of courtly love and to dissociate himself from Damyan by redefining the courtly lover" (66).

¹⁰ The false tercelet in the Squire's Tale is also described as being "So ravysshed" by his lust for the falcon (547).

¹¹ The Merchant notes that "Lo, pitee renneth soone in gentil herte!" (1986).

¹² See Wimsatt for a more complete discussion on Chaucer's debt to Machaut. Also see Windeatt.

¹³ Another example of Lancelot seeking retaliation for slander occurs elsewhere in Chrétien's *Charrette*; after crossing the sword bridge, Lancelot is subjected to abuse when a strange knight arrives and reveals that Lancelot had condescended to ride in the cart. As his host laments the circumstances that would force anyone to ride in a cart, Lancelot fights the strange knight. For much of the battle, the two are evenly matched; however, Lancelot gains the upper hand when he remembers that the strange knight "had reproached him most basely / For having ridden in the cart" ("il li avoit molt vilmant / la charrete mise devant"; 2735-36).

¹⁴ Stanley J. Kahrl also notes the Squire's contempt (203).

¹⁵ Pearsall notes that "The tale is growing, as romances tend to do, almost of their own will, into a monstrous oriental saga, and the Squire is no longer in control" (90).

¹⁶ Peterson makes a similar observation (66-67, 74).

¹⁷ As John M. Manly and Edith Rickert note, only six manuscripts use the link between the Squire's Tale and the Franklin's Tale (2.298); however, as the Ellesmere MS is one of those, I follow other scholars in regarding the Franklin's words to the Squire as intentional.

¹⁸ Chaucer himself held some of the same offices attributed to the Franklin; see Roland Blenner-Hassett.

¹⁹ Haller echoes this idea when he writes that the Franklin "offers what he presumes is a tribute to the Squire in his own portrait of Aurelius" (294).

²⁰ Calin also suggests that Chaucer's Franklin's Tale indicates a familiarity with the French Arthuriana of Chrétien and Marie de France (354), and notes that the pilgrim Franklin deals with the same questions of love and *fin amor* as Chrétien and Gautier d'Arras in their respective stories (350).

²¹ There have been a number of arguments questioning the validity of Aurelius's accomplishment of the deed; for example, Alan T. Gaylord argues that the marriage promise should take precedence over Aurelius's claim, and others have argued that the removal of the rocks is merely illusion, and therefore Dorigen is under no obligation to acquiesce to his demands.

²² Kahrl also takes this view of the pilgrim Squire (203).

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